**Showcasing the DNR: The world can always use more ‘Happy Little Trees’**

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The Happy Little Trees program began in 2019, during Michigan’s state park centennial celebration, as an initiative to brand a partnership between the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the Michigan Department of Corrections.

Each year, the DNR collects seeds from native tree species in state parks and takes them to correctional facilities to be planted. The seedlings that are produced are cared for by prison inmates.

When the trees grow to approximately 5 feet tall, they are transported back to state parks to be planted to replace diseased and damaged trees.

The DNR approached Bob Ross, Inc. to get permission from the late how-to painter’s company to name the DNR/DOC program “Happy Little Trees.”

The program’s name is a tribute to the American artist and TV host Bob Ross who was known for his painting of landscapes and his gentle demeanor. Ross, who died in 1994 at age 52, starred in the television program “The Joy of Painting,” which aired from 1983 to 1994 on PBS in the U.S.

Ross often talked about “happy little trees” while teaching people how to paint them. The premise of the DNR/DOC’s program “Happy Little Trees” was that the trees would be able to happily leave correctional facilities to live in a state park.

Joan Kowalski, executive director of Bob Ross, Inc., gladly accepted the DNR proposal and claimed, “Bob would have loved this.”

The DNR/DOC’s partnership has produced more than 100,000 native plants, shrubs and trees since its start in 2014. With support from the Bob Ross partnership, more than 2,100 trees have been planted within 20 Michigan state parks.

The initial partnership between DNR, DOC and Bob Ross, Inc. was intended to solicit volunteers to plant trees in the parks. Volunteers received “Happy Planting” T-shirts that featured a Bob Ross image as well as commemorated the DNR centennial celebration.

With an overwhelming outpouring of people wanting to help, we knew we had a special concept. Later that first year, we decided to do a fundraiser for the program.

The concept of “Run for the Trees 5K” was born. All proceeds support tree planting and forest protection efforts, including invasive plant and forest pest management and early invasive pest detection surveys in Michigan state parks.

It was anticipated the DNR would host a small 5K in one of the state parks with a couple hundred people. A notice went out to gauge interest in the 5K run/walk event, and more than 20,000 people wanted to participate.

The DNR quickly pivoted from an in-person event to a virtual event to accommodate requests to participate from all over the world.

In April 2020, the first “Run for the Trees 5K” took place. With 19,500 participants, running, walking and hiking, we covered all 50 states and several countries.

Friends and families participated, and even if they were unable to gather together because of the coronavirus pandemic, it gave them a sense of togetherness and purpose. It was quickly decided to make the Run for the Trees an annual event.

The event saw another 18,000 participants in 2021 and 14,000 in 2022. Registration is still open for the 2023 event, and we are quickly approaching another 10,000 participants.

Participants are encouraged to complete their 5K over the time span between April 22 and April 28, approximately between Earth Day and Arbor Day each year.

The program has raised over $1 million dollars since it started.

Wanting to “share the love” with other states, the DNR has embarked on a partnership in 2023 that will allow the agency to donate proceeds from the event to other states.

Now, when participants register, they can pick from five states their race proceeds can go to. South Carolina, Wisconsin, Ohio and Indiana have joined Michigan in the program in hopes of receiving proceeds to support stewardship efforts in their states.

The need for tree protection knows no boundaries, and the mission is to have this event support trees across the United States within the next couple of years.

Due to demand, registration was extended to March 17, and participants can still sign up at [runsignup.com/bobross5k](http://www.runsignup.com/bobross5k). Packets will ship before the end of the month and will include a commemorative T-shirt, bib number and finisher’s medal in time for the April event.

Participants are encouraged to get outdoors and complete their 5K by walking, running or hiking on their favorite trail or at their favorite state park and to submit photos on the DNR’s website and social media by tagging #runforthetrees, #bobross5k and #mistateparks.

The success of this event has been realized by not only those who love to be active outdoors, but also by those who are looking for a cool experience to share with friends and family, those who are inspired by Bob Ross’s gentle nature and love of trees, and those who want to make a positive difference for future generations to come.

Learn more about the Happy Little Trees program at [Michigan.gov/DNRHappyLittleTrees](http://www.Michigan.gov/DNRHappyLittleTrees).

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